

The Sword and the Trowel

An Allegory

Long, long ago, a people came back to their own land after being away a long time. In the latter days, a foreign prince had come and carried them off to exile – to an unknown people and to strange customs where, for 200 years, they lamented their lost cities and countrysides.

So they found joy in coming home; but there was sorrow too. For the land had fallen into decay and the vineyards were overgrown, the wild animals had multiplied with no one to keep them in check, and – perhaps worst of all – the King's palace stood in absolute ruin. A mighty humiliation. For when the people had left their own land in sadness and rebellion, they'd also left the palace to be plundered, its treasured beauties hauled off and desecrated by wayward nations. Now, upon their return, it stood empty and desolate. A reminder of their own faithless treason to their King – a mighty shame. As they came in sight of the palace's crumbling walls, now home to the jackals and the crows and the feral dogs, they cried a lament. The song rushed in and out of the gaps in the stone and it whistled like the wind in the wheat during the glory days before everything had come undone.

This long procession of returning peoples trailed along the walls. And they were led by a man whose robes were stained by the dust of the road and weary travel. Perhaps they had been white robes once, but long days fighting off bandits and robbers and times spent appeasing an edgy people had worn them almost to tatters. His face too, showed signs of stress. Lines were about the mouth and laugh-less eyes. But though the eyes did not laugh there was a sense of peace about him, hanging like ready rainclouds above his head. Any minute the clouds could break and drops of mercy come pouring down the tired face and the mirthless eyes would laugh again. But before this could ever be, there was work to do.

Not long after returning, the people set about rebuilding the palace. But in all their doings – in every good act – there came great opposition. Wolves and lions began to gather around

at night, howling, growling, slinking up to campfires so that their eyes glittered before quickly turning in upon the darkness again with a flick of a tail, as if to scout out the defenses of these new desperate creatures. The winter snows set in, burying the palace's foundation in sludge, stinging the eyes of the labourers, turning stone to ice. And the people bickered among themselves. They were found guilty of much wrong in the past and that sin haunted them worse than any bad weather which was a better hunter than the lions and wolves stalking them during the day and threatening their children at night. Their blotted past was a constant companion and rarely a day went by when it did not interfere with their genuine goodwill, and with the rebuilding of the palace. The winter grew wild and fierce, and the people began to change too – they became less and less like people and more like the wild animals they shared the land with. The people would snarl and snap at each other in their weariness and hunger; any slight impatience sent them growling away, muttering to themselves as they dug and hauled and built. Care and comradery almost disappeared. Then the wolves and lions began to approach the workers in broad daylight without any hesitation at all and say to them, 'You foolish men! If even an insect stands upon your wall, it will topple over. Will you really raise a palace from rubble?' Then they would saunter away snickering and growling. Conditions worsened until a decree was put in place. The heralds came out, skirting the newly laid foundations and striding along the walls and shouting, 'From now on, every man holds a weapon in one hand and works with the other. Do not cease until the work be done.'

And the building continued. Men stooped and lifted with swords strapped to their sides. Young men shaped and chiseled with one eye on their weapon and the other on their work. Boys carried and hauled with clubs in one hand and stones in the other. Being ready and willing, there was nothing now stopping the people from their task. Fighting and working became second nature and the workers rejoiced when their enemies subsided. And together they sung the song of The Sword and the Trowel. It was mournful, but hope hung upon the edges of its melody.

In this our land, in the night or day

*We strain to finish the work began
Our King must have his palace again
We work with sword and trowel in hand*

*To conquer life's mortal foe in us
To slay our enemies – that ignorant band
Of arrogant growls and wily words
We fight with sword and trowel in hand*

*And come the day when stones are set
When the breezes bring our King to us
Tool and weapon shall lie forgotten
Lie forgotten in the sand
And there we'll clutch at our reward:
the joy of many thousands*

That night, there was heard across the empty valleys of the land, echoes of chinking iron hitting stone and the strong hiss of hot metal plunged into water as new implements were made by the hundreds. The wolves and lions sat and listened to it in the dark, and the glittering of the blacksmith's fires reflected like tiny stars in their eyes. But they dared not come close. Man's frenzied activity and fresh determination held them off.

One day, when the winter sleet had moved on and spring began to hurry out in green grasses and soft breezes and mild nights, a young man, dirtied with mortar up to his elbows put the final stone in place, whistling as he worked. The next day was marked by much jubilation. Crowds gathered about the palace to hang it with ribbons in the royal colours, to serenade its new facade with trumpets and flutes and harps and tambourines, to bring in a feast of jelly-topped cakes and casks of finest wine and gorgeously dressed meat and seasoned vegetables, while giant bunches of purple grapes hung between poles

carried by two burly men. A crowd gathered at the palace steps as a man appeared, regal, at the top of them. He was the same who had first led the people to the ruined palace in his tatty robes. But now he stood before the finished palace with his arms outstretched towards its towering steeples, giving thanks. And when he turned towards the crowd gathered at his feet, he smiled. His bright blue robes hung majestically from his ageing yet healthy frame. Robes of blue with a sash of gold. At once, all fell silent to listen for his voice.

'Loyal subjects – the time has come for rejoicing. The night is now gone. Let all who love the day remain. But if any one of you loves night, let him turn away forever, for the night is now gone.'

There was a deep quiet as the people took this in. But no one turned to leave. Not one stirred. A sparrow landed at the man's feet and danced upon the paving. The wind gently billowed the blue robes like a surging ocean wave. The King turned to enter his palace. And his eyes laughed with the laughter of thousands.